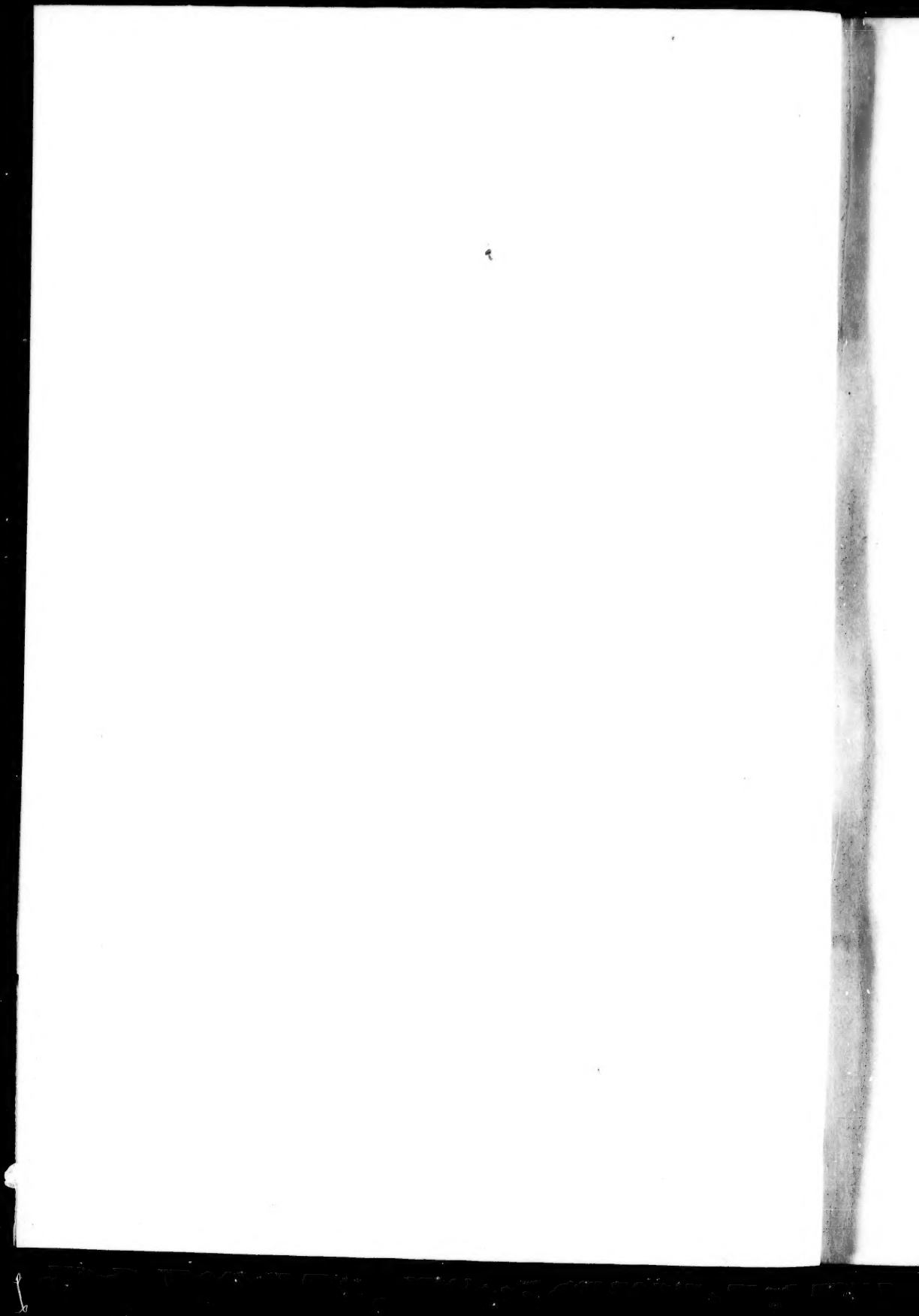
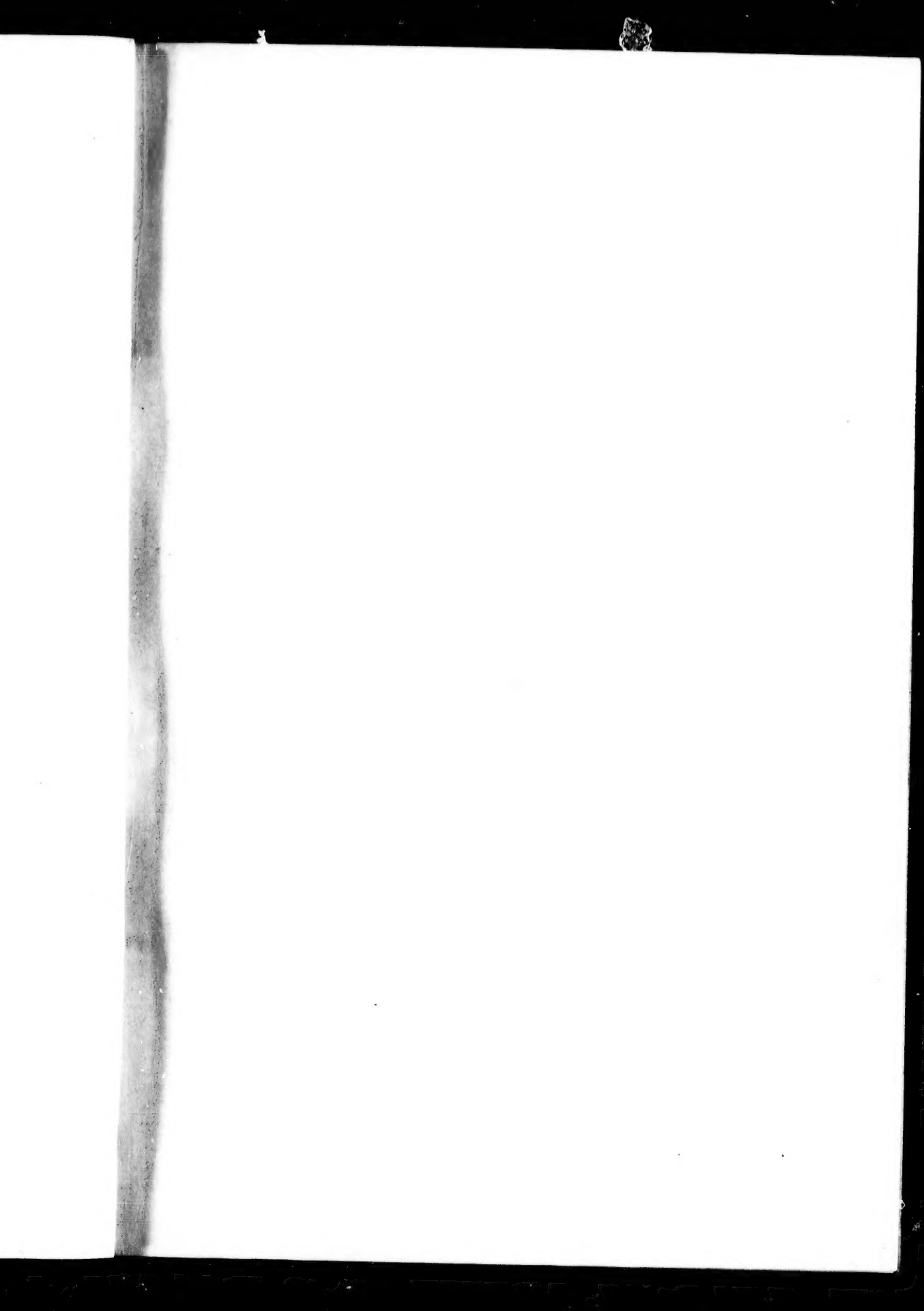


AIRLIE'S MISSION







Frontispiece.

AIRLIE'S MISSION

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN

(MRS BURNETT SMITH)

AUTHOR OF "ALDERSYDE," "SHEILA," "ST VEDAS,"
"MAITLAND OF LAURIESTON," ETC., ETC.

"Of weakest vessels God oft times hath need,
To wait His time may be to serve indeed."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LILIAN RUSSELL

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AIRLIE'S MISSION

CHAPTER I.

"**I** REALLY wish those boys would come down to breakfast when it is on the table. I am sick of their irregular hours. If your father had been alive, they would not dare to be so careless. They are getting quite beyond me altogether."

It was a fretful, peevish, complaining voice, which quite prepared one to see a discontented, worried expression of face. And yet it was a sweet, kind face, if rather undecided, the face of a woman without much strength of character, totally unfitted to face the battle of life alone. Perhaps feeble health had much to do with Mrs Keith's fretful disposition. She had long been partially invalided, and there were lines of pain and weariness on her brow, and about her drooping mouth, which told their own tale.

Sordid care had never touched her, it is true, but there were other troubles which had aged her before her time. She had been deprived of the love and care of a devoted and noble husband, just when her children most needed the firmness of his guiding hand. To one of her nature, the desolation of widowhood was a peculiarly bitter experience, for she was totally unfitted to breast alone the tide of life. It was a pleasant, cheerful, luxurious place, the morning room at Errol Lodge. A cheerful fire burned in the pretty grate, and a bright ruddy glow danced on the well-appointed breakfast table, and vied with the wintry sunbeams slanting through the crimson curtains, and playing on the golden head of a young lady at the window, busy already with a dainty piece of embroidery. Janet Keith was like a picture, in that bright setting; her fair, pale, refined face, crowned by the shining plaits of her golden hair, she looked as if nothing could ever ruffle or disturb her composure. Her dress was dainty and becoming, too, a warm crimson morning gown, fitting to perfection; the linen at throat and wrists was

as spotless as the snow lying on the lawn; everything about her was tasteful and harmonious: it was something of a rest to look at her after seeing the worn, fretful, unsettled look on her mother's faded face. Mrs Keith was sitting very near to the fire, stooping over it with her thin hands outspread to the cheerful heat, her ample white wrap gathered close about her bent shoulders, as if she suffered from the chilliness of the morning air.

"Why don't you speak, Janet?" she asked, querulously, when no response came to her.

"What shall I say, mamma?" inquired Janet, in her calm, cool, sweet voice. "You know my opinions regarding Errol and Jack. They have been too long left to the freedom of their own sweet wills, and are incorrigible now."

"That is cold enough comfort. Really, I wonder why my sons should be so undutiful. Just look at George Maitland; what a comfort he is to his mother. He considers her in everything."

"George Maitland is an insufferable prig,

I think, mamma. Our boys are gentlemen at any rate; and it is natural they should wish to enjoy life. I think Marion requires a word as well as the boys. It is twenty minutes to nine, and a quarter past eight is supposed to be our breakfast hour. I have been down stairs since half past seven, and must confess I should like a cup of coffee now."

"Well, why don't you have it? There is nothing to hinder you."

"No, but it is best to sit down as a family," said Janet, in her prim fashion. "Why, there is Marion coming up the avenue. She is reforming, surely, when she takes a constitutional before breakfast. She looks very sober, as if she had not greatly enjoyed it."

In a few seconds the breakfast-room door opened, and Mrs Keith's second daughter entered the room, and going up to her mother's side, put her arm round her, and kissed her affectionately.

"Oh, what a cold face, child; you make me shiver!" exclaimed Mrs Keith, drawing back. "Where have you been? What a

colour you have! Quite like a milk-maid's, isn't it, Janet."

"Rather. It is not for complexion's sake you require a morning walk, Marion," said Janet Keith, lifting her cold, keen, blue eyes to her young sister's round, ruddy face. "I was saying to mamma you were surely turning over a new leaf."

Marion Keith pulled off her gloves, and turned her head quickly away. A hasty retort was on her lips, but she repressed it, and again approaching her mother's chair, knelt down on the hearth. She was the youngest of the family, and the least spoiled. She was only seventeen, but looked young for her years, being still, as Janet often told her, an awkward school-girl. But there was something sweet and winning about her, and the deep brown eye had an earnest, tender gleam, which betokened a warm and loving heart.

"Child, your nose is as red as a carrot! where have you been?" pursued Mrs Keith, looking not with approval on the offending feature.

"I was out, mamma," said Marion, vaguely. "I met the postman in the Grange Road, and there is a letter for you."

"Where is it? Who is it from?"

"It is from Tahai; a black-edged letter addressed in a strange handwriting. What can be wrong?" said Marion, drawing it slowly from her pocket.

"Reach me my eyeglass," said Mrs Keith, starting up. "I am afraid it will be bad news of your Uncle James. He was poorly last time Airlie wrote."

Marion looked on eagerly while her mother adjusted her eyeglass, and broke the seal of the ominous-looking letter; even Janet suspended her work, and waited with some interest to hear the news.

"It is just as I thought, girls; your poor Uncle James has succumbed to that frightful climate at last," said Mrs Keith, running her eye over the brief communication. "The letter is from the Rev. Mr Balfour, who fortunately happened to be at the station when he died. This is what he says:—

“MISSION STATION, TAHAI, LIVINGSTONIA.

“October 14th, 18—.

“MADAM,—It is with deep regret I have to inform you of the lamented death of Mr Keith, which took place this morning at daybreak. Some weeks ago he was seized with fever, and as this is his third attack, there was no hope entertained of him from the first. He became conscious towards the end, and added a word of happy confirmation to the already glorious and abiding testimony of his noble and unselfish life. He is an irreparable loss to the cause and to the poor creatures among whom he has so heroically laboured and for whom he has given up so much. He will be laid to rest beside Mrs Keith. Miss Keith is wonderfully sustained by a loving Lord, but is physically much prostrated. As soon as arrangements can be made, she will sail for Europe. It is her only chance of restoration to health. Devotion to her father and to the cause both had so much at heart may cost her life also. With every expression of sympathy and regard,—Believe me, yours cordially,

“WILLIAM D. BALFOUR.

“ ‘Miss Keith will write as soon as she is able. Fuller particulars will follow. This is in haste to catch the mail.’ ”

“Poor Cousin Airlie!” said Marion through dropping tears. “How dreadful to be left alone in such a country!”

“I don’t think Airlie minds it at all,” said Janet, quietly resuming her work; “I am quite sure that if it were not for her health she would insist on remaining among these frightful heathen. She is that kind of girl. I suppose she will be coming straight here, mamma?”

“Of course, though one invalid in a house is enough; but, poor girl, we must try and be kind to her. I must not forget that her father was my John’s only brother, and that he loved him very much.”

“Oh, yes, he did. How often I have heard him say he would like to go out to Tahai on a visit,” said Marion, softly, with a far-away, regretful look in her eyes, which told that her thoughts were with the happy past, which had been brightened by the love of the father whom she had idolised.

"It will be rather troublesome having her here just in the middle of the season," said Janet, in the same cool fashion. "Will it be incumbent upon us to refuse all invitations on her account?"

"Really, Janet, you are rather heartless," said Mrs Keith, in feeble remonstrance. "Of course we must go into deeper mourning, and live quietly for some months. Ah! here are the boys at last."

A scrap of the tuneful *Pinafore*, sung in a deep musical voice, with the accompaniment of a shrill whistle, indicated the approach of "the boys," as Mrs Keith still termed her tall sons. Both were students of medicine at Edinburgh University, preparing to follow their father's profession, only as yet they had not exhibited any of his noble, earnest, self-denying spirit. Life was still play-time to them, study occupying a very minor place; and yet, as they entered the room together, big, broad-shouldered, muscular fellows, they looked as if it were quite time they were doing some worthy work in the world.

They were a handsome pair, it was not easy

to know which to admire the more ; Errol with his dark, finely featured face, piercing dark eye, and heavy masses of dark-brown hair, or merry, fair-haired, laughing-eyed Jack, who turned everything and everybody into good-natured fun. Both were favourites wherever they went, and were much sought after by the gay sport-loving circle of students to whom the duties of their profession were things of very minor consideration. No jovial gathering, no night's fun or frolic was complete without the Keiths, and perhaps all their enjoyments were not quite so innocent as those who loved them could have desired.

"Really, boys," began Mrs Keith, but in a moment she was interrupted by the incorrigible Jack—

"Not a word, mother. We sprang when we heard the first bell. Didn't we, Errol?"

"Which must have been the breakfast bell, rung half an hour ago," said Janet severely, as she folded up her work, and proceeded to take her place at the table.

"*We* are not responsible for the omission of the rising bell, Miss," said Jack. "Hulloa,

Min, been crying, eh!" he said, turning to Marion. "You in the black books too? Never mind, we're all chums."

"Who's the letter from, mother?" asked Errol, who, without waiting for grace or anything else, was half through with his breakfast.

"From Tahai. Your Uncle James is dead."

"Have they eaten him at last?" asked the irrepressible. "Excuse the question, mother. In the circumstances it is natural. But what *did* he die of?"

"Fever. There's the letter."

"Read you it, Jack; I haven't time; I should be off. Minnie, you might watch for the car; I'll be too late if I walk."

"Just as if you cared. How many times have you been locked out and rather enjoyed it, eh?" said Jack.

"Mother, I'll read it after. Tell us about it. What's to become of that poor little girl Airlie?"

"She's coming here."

"Here, oh thunder, won't that be jolly!" said Jack, glorying in Janet's disgusted look. Janet Keith could not tolerate the slang with

which her brothers freely adorned their conversation, and on that very account she heard more of it ; they only liked to tease her.

"There may be two opinions about the jollity," said Errol, jumping up. "From the style of her letters, I would imagine she would be rather too goody-goody for this lot."

"Speak for yourself, Errol, if you please," said Janet, stiffly.

"Oh, I did not include you. I shouldn't have presumed. Nevertheless, it is possible that even with the immaculate there may be room for improvement," said Errol, rather mockingly.

"Really, children, I wish you wouldn't snap at each other like that. I am afraid Airlie Keith will find Edinburgh heathen worse to bear than African ones."

"Especially the male portion of them," said Janet, expressively ; but there was no more said, for Marion shouted that the car was coming, and the boys flew out, buttoning their overcoats as they went. Then the ladies drew into the table to enjoy their breakfast and discuss in all its bearings the news the African mail had brought.

CHAPTER II.

"WELI, who is to go to the station to meet your cousin?" So asked Mrs Keith at dinner one afternoon, looking round enquiringly upon her children.

"I can't go," answered Jack, promptly. "You must, Errol, you know I have Rodger's notes to get up. I'll need to stick in all night."

"You always have a fit of study when anything is required which doesn't exactly suit you," said Errol, dryly. "Well, I suppose I'll need to go, mother. When does the train arrive?"

"About eight. You must be down in good time, for it would be dreadful for the poor girl to arrive and find nobody to welcome her."

"One of the girls had better come with me, then. It's rather stupid for a fellow to meet an unknown relation and do all the talk."

"Let me go, mamma," pleaded Marion

earnestly, for somehow her warm heart was very sore for the orphan who had travelled so many thousand miles in poor health to see her father's kindred, to whom she was not so welcome as she might have been.

"Won't you go, Janet?" asked Mrs Keith. "I think you should."

"Oh, no; if Marion wants, by all means let her go. I daresay she will know better how to speak to Airlie Keith than I. You all tell me I am too stiff with strangers."

"But Airlie is not a stranger," said Marion, quickly. "Why, we have known her all our lives by her letters."

"Ah, but it will be a different thing to meet her face to face," said Janet, dryly. "You boys will need to be on your best behaviour," she added to her brothers, "in case Airlie thinks Edinburgh heathen worse than those she has left."

"Who's going to make any difference for Airlie Keith?" exclaimed Jack, scornfully. "If she tries the goody-goody business here, she'll find she's made a mistake."

"Shut up, Jack," said Errol, sharply, and

Jack eyed him with instant amazement. But Errol's face was perfectly sober, his eyes grave and rebuking; evidently he was in earnest.

For a long time now Errol Keith had allowed himself to drift with the tide, content to enjoy life, and put away from him all thought of its higher meanings; but of late some whisperings of dissatisfaction had come to him. He felt himself growing older, and making no headway. He saw others who had entered the lists with him already doing a good work in the world, and making name and position for themselves. At times Errol Keith writhed in very scorn of himself, but idle habits are not easily thrown off. It takes the hand of a giant to unbind the fetters which, with touch as light as a feather, we may have bound upon ourselves.

Shortly before eight o'clock that evening, Errol and Marion Keith were pacing up and down the platform at the Waverley Station, awaiting the arrival of the London train. It was five-and-twenty minutes late, and when at last it steamed up to the platform, Marion began to tremble, and even Errol felt himself

a trifle excited. There were a great number of passengers, none of whom answered to their idea of Airlie Keith. But at last, when the throng had somewhat dispersed, Errol's eyes lighted on the small solitary figure of a girl standing at the far end of the platform, just before the luggage van, looking helpless and bewildered.

"There she is, Marion; come on," said Errol, and in a moment the pair were in front of the solitary passenger.

"Are you Airlie Keith?" said Errol, and Marion wondered to hear the gentleness of his voice.

The slight figure in its big fur wrap turned swiftly round, the small head was raised, and a pair of wonderful dark eyes uplifted themselves to the speaker's face.

"I am Airlie Keith," she answered. "You are Errol; and this, I think, is Marion. Oh, I am so glad to see you."

She extended her hand to Errol, but he put it aside, and putting one arm round her, bent his face to hers. So Errol's kiss, Errol's greeting, was the first Airlie Keith received,

"How are you, Cousin Airlie?" said Marion, then, and they kissed each other; and somehow in a moment every feeling of restraint was gone.

"I wish I had come to meet you in London, Airlie," said Errol quickly, for these sweet eyes reproached him with his uncousinly behaviour.

"Oh, there was no need," said Airlie, lightly. "I assure you I am a most independent young woman, who does not even know the meaning of fear. I had a delightful journey. There was such a funny old lady in the compartment with me. If I could draw I would make a picture of her. She had such a horrified face when I told her how far I had come alone. But, there, we need not talk. Could you see after my belongings, Errol, please? It is so cold here."

In a very short space of time Errol had everything out of the luggage-van, and the porter carried them over to the cab-stance.

"Would you help me a little, Errol, if you please," said Airlie, at the cab door. "I

have not been very strong, you know, and I can scarcely step up alone."

"I beg your pardon, Airlie; I was busy with the boxes, and did not think," said Errol, as he lifted her right into the cab. "You see, our girls are so accustomed to help themselves."

"Don't apologise. I am just a bundle of aches and pains, you know. I said to Mr Balfour I would be ashamed to show myself before you all," said Airlie; and now that the excitement of the meeting was past, she sank back into her corner, and Errol saw that she was thoroughly exhausted. And it flashed upon him then, as it had never done before, what a terrible experience it must have been for this young, frail girl to make such a journey alone; only her bright, brave, patient spirit had sustained her to its end.

"I was not sure whether it was a wise step to come to Scotland. I am afraid I will be a burden on Aunt Marion and you all, but the longing to see you all conquered, so I am here," said Airlie, presently.

"And I was practically useless at Tahai. Perhaps that was the strongest plea urged upon me to leave. It was a terrible struggle to make up my mind at first."

"It must have been," said Errol, quietly, and a sob broke from Marion's lips, and she reached out her hand and clasped Airlie's firm and close in token of her sympathy and love. It was well, perhaps, for Airlie Keith that these two were the first to meet and greet her; they were certainly the warmest hearts in Errol Lodge. Airlie seemed to feel the jolting of the cab, for she breathed a sigh of relief when it turned into Palmerston Road and swept up the smooth gravelled approach to her new home.

"They told me on the way that there was snow on the ground, but it was so dark I could discern nothing," said Airlie. "I have never seen snow. Ah! there it is! How beautiful, how unlike anything I have ever seen before."

"You will see plenty of it here, I promise you, Airlie," said Errol, grimly. "In the

meantime, let me take you into the house. Shall I carry you?"

"Oh no, in case Aunt Marion should be frightened out of her wits," said Airlie, merrily, but she leaned heavily enough on the strong arm offered to her; and so they entered the house, Marion following behind. As they stepped into the hall the dining-room door opened, and Mrs Keith, with her wraps about her head and shoulders, came out, followed by Janet.

"Aunt Marion!" exclaimed Airlie, in a quick, eager whisper, and her eyes flashed one wistful, seeking glance upon her aunt's pale face.

"How are you, Airlie? You are welcome to Edinburgh," said Mrs Keith, and taking the girl in her arms, she kissed her kindly, enough, but Airlie felt that there was something lacking. Then Janet—stately, beautiful, and calm—offered her a welcoming hand, and presently Jack came bounding downstairs, two steps at a time, and gave her hand a hearty, boyish squeeze; and so the greetings were all over.

In one swift, keen, comprehensive glance, Janet Keith had taken in her cousin's whole appearance, and had passed her mental verdict, which was not flattering to the stranger.

"The girls will take you up to your room, my dear," said Mrs Keith. "I am a sad invalid, laid up with every breath of cold. I hope you will find everything nice. Tea is waiting, whenever you are ready."

"Very well, Aunt Marion," said Airlie, quietly, and then she turned to Errol once more, as if seeking his sympathy and help.

"Come, Cousin Airlie, and I will take you to your room," said Janet, stepping forward.

"Will you excuse me if I ask Errol to help me?" said Airlie, with her swift, pathetic smile. "I am a poor, useless thing, Cousin Janet. My back has failed me, and I cannot climb upstairs alone."

So Airlie ascended the long stair, slowly and heavily, leaning on her cousin's arm, and when she reached the landing her face was quite flushed, but they did not know that it was with pain.

"Thank you, Errol. Now, Cousin Janet,

"I am ready," she said, and they entered the room together. It was a cheerful, cosy corner, with a bright fire burning in the grate. Airlie looked round her with a sigh of content.

"I shall be at home here, I think," she said brightly. "I will just sit down one moment, Janet, to get my breath. Oh dear, how weak and weary I am."

She sank into a low chair, and leaning back, closed her eyes. The colour receded quickly enough from her face, and left it so ashen hued that Janet Keith feared to look upon it.

"Cousin Airlie, I am afraid you are very ill."

"I have been. I am on furlough on that account," said Airlie, and again that sweet, bright smile sent a gleam upon her face. "I am all right now. Do you think I could go down to tea as I am?"

"Surely. Let me help you," said Janet, and with unusual kindness she quickly unfastened her cousin's wraps and laid them aside, then stooping down, took off her boots.

"I could sponge your face and hands if you like, Airlie. That always refreshes one."

"Oh, thanks, I can do that myself," said Airlie, rising. "Thank you, Cousin Janet." Then with a childish frankness she added: "How lovely you are. You are just like a picture."

"Oh, nonsense, Airlie!" laughed Janet, but a pleased colour stole into her fair cheek, telling that the unstudied compliment was not unappreciated.

Somewhat refreshed with the cold water, but still very pale and worn, Airlie was ready to go to the dining-room. They were all waiting for her there, and when she entered, leaning heavily on Janet's arm, they were struck by the great and almost painful contrast between them. They were almost of an age, but Janet's tall, straight, graceful figure, and clear, healthy-hued, beautiful face, made Airlie's shrinking figure and thin, sallow face, with its pathetic eyes and frame of short dark curls, look like those of a much older woman.

"Have I kept you waiting long, Aunt Marion? How very cold it is here," said Airlie, approaching the fire with unmistakable

eagerness. "I feel as if I could shrink into myself."

"Take a chair, Airlie," said Jack with ready kindness, pulling a low basket lounge right up to the tiled hearth.

"Thank you; but aren't you waiting for me?" she said, with a glance at the table.

"Suppose you sit here, and I'll wait on you," said Errol, kindly. "You look as if you were starving."

"So I am, but remember, I have been accustomed all my life to the thermometer at 100°," said Airlie, laughing. "May I sit here, as Errol suggests, Aunt Marion?"

"Surely, my dear; you look frightfully ill, now that I see you," said Mrs Keith, hardly yet recovered from the shock of the girl's fragile appearance.

"Why, there is very little of you to look at. What a morsel you are."

"There was more of me when I left Tahai, I believe," said Airlie. "But if you had been jolted in a bullock-waggon as I was, over seven hundred miles of rocky ground, where there is no road, and scarcely a track, you might

have diminished too. Oh, it was a frightful journey."

"Jolly frightful, I should say," assented Jack with energy.

"But they were so kind to me; they saved me as much as possible," said Airlie, softly.

"Who, my dear?" asked Mrs Keith.

"The natives, father's children. Half a dozen of them came all the way to the coast with me; and sometimes, when I was very tired with the rough riding, they carried me in their arms. That was such a rest."

"They must be good creatures. I didn't think these sort of heathens had so much feeling," said Mrs Keith.

A little tremulous smile touched Airlie's lips, but they saw her eyes grow dim.

"I will tell you about them some day, Aunt Marion," she said. "I don't think anybody will ever love me as they did; at least not with such utter unselfishness. It nearly broke my heart to see their grief, first over father's death, and then over my leaving them. And there is no one left behind to comfort them or to keep them in the right way. There is

nobody to take up the work for which papa laid down his life."

"Don't fret about it, Airlie," said Mrs Keith, fussily. "I daresay some of the missionary societies will look after that. They ought to, anyway, for they get a great deal of money for such purposes. Janet, is tea in?"

"Yes, mamma," said Janet. So they gathered about the table, all except Airlie, who was glad to sit still and be waited on by Errol, who seemed to like the task. And the shadow lifted from her heart a little, and she had a happy laugh and a gay jest for them all, and somehow managed to make herself the chief centre of attraction in the room. And though Jack had been too studiously inclined to go to the station, he seemed to find time to listen to Airlie's account of her voyage, and to laugh over her irresistible descriptions of its more comical aspects. Not again that night did Airlie allude to Tahai or anything connected with it. It seemed as if she could not bear to talk about it yet.

CHAPTER III.

"**W**HAT are you making, Cousin Janet?"

"An antimacassar for the bazaar next month. I have so much to do for bazaars I never have any time to sew for myself," said Janet Keith, a trifle impatiently. "You ought to lend a hand, Airlie, seeing it is for the Zenana Missions?"

"Is it? What zenanas?"

"Oh, I don't know. I do work and ask no questions. I believe it is somewhere in India. I think it is to provide medically trained nurses for the zenanas, to try and convert the women in them. I don't see much good in it myself. They must be quite used to their way of life, and I believe will be happier as they are. There are many things in missions I don't approve of, Airlie. I think all this education for the masses at home and abroad only tends

to make them discontented with their station and circumstances in which it has pleased God to place them."

Janet Keith delivered her statement with a kind of quiet triumph, and looked at her cousin as she spoke as if desirous to see what effect it would have on her. They were alone together in the drawing-room at Errol Lodge one grey March afternoon, Airlie lying on a couch midway between the fire and the oriel window, from which she could see the green slopes of the Braid Hills, and the still snow-capped peaks of the Pentlands standing out clearly against a dark and lowering sky.

"Do you think so, Cousin Janet?" was all Airlie said just then, and Janet saw from the expression of her face that she was thinking of something else. It was a sweet, true, winning face in its repose, pathetic a little in its paleness and wornness, for Airlie Keith was not yet making much progress towards health.

"If I were able, Janet, I would argue the question with you," she said at length. "I think I could prove that you are mistaken,

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Janet sitting by Airlie's couch.

If you had any idea of what the women of India suffer in the zenanas, you would not speak so heartlessly. I only wish I had health."

"What would you do?"

"Go through the necessary training for zenana work. Perhaps, if I had my choice, I would prefer work like father's, but a woman single-handed would be of no use in Tahai. It requires a man with decision and force of character to deal with the natives there. They need some one whom they can stand in awe of as well as love."

"Would you really rather do that than live here, Airlie? If you were only well, we would show you how very pleasant we in Edinburgh can make life."

"I don't doubt that, Cousin Janet. I am very happy here with you all, but if I were well I should not dare to sit still in pleasant idleness when there is so much to do and so few to do it."

"If these are your views, what must you think of us—me, for instance?" asked Janet, dryly.

A painful flush rose to Airlie's pale cheek. "That is hardly fair, Cousin Janet."

"All is fair in war, and we are opposed at present," said Janet, with a laugh. "Were I ever so willing, I could not leave home just now. You know how necessary I am to mamma. What do you suppose would become of the housekeeping of Errol Lodge if I were to rush off seeking work in mission fields? Is there not a charity which begins at home, Airlie?"

"Cousin Janet, have I ever hinted that I thought you failed in any duty?"

"No, but you make me feel often as if I were a hardened, idle sinner," answered Janet, speaking with warmth, for she felt on the subject. "I am sure I do my duty. Few girls of my age do so much. You know what charge I have here, and all I have to do for these boys. Then I teach in the Sunday School, and collect for church purposes, and work for charity bazaars, and I know not what else."

"Janet, Janet, hush! you hurt me!" said Airlie, quickly, and her lip quivered, for her cousin's tone cut her to the heart.

"I don't mean to, Airlie," said Janet, quietly, and then there was a little painful silence.

"There is Errol's step on the gravel, Janet," said Airlie, suddenly.

"Is it? Then I must go and see what Susan is after in the kitchen," said Janet, folding up her work. "What a sharp ear you have, child! I have lived beside the boys all my life, and I could not distinguish Errol's step from Jack's yet."

Airlie smiled, for Janet's voice was kind and pleasant again; her fair face smooth and tranquil as was its wont.

"Airlie, dear, I did not mean to speak unkindly. Can't you see that you, in your sweet unselfishness, are shaming us out of selfish ease?" said Janet quickly, and stooping down, she pressed her lips to her cousin's cheek, and hastily left the room.

Before Airlie had recovered from her astonishment, Errol was at her side. Whatever room in the house held Airlie was a magnet to the boys. "Where's Airlie?" was their first question when they came in, so had

the cousin from over the seas wound herself about all their hearts. Yet none could have told what her charm was, only it was felt in no small degree.

"Well, Airlie, how are you to-day?"

"Better, thank you, Errol," the girl answered, with her sweet, bright smile. Even in her keenest pain, and she *did* suffer sometimes, no word of complaint or murmuring had ever been heard to pass the lips of Airlie Keith. She did not talk much about her religion, but lived it, which is a much rarer and more potent influence than any talk, however eloquent.

"I thought you looked very sober when I came in. Have you and Janet been falling out, eh? I met her on the stairs with a very red face."

"Not exactly, but we've been having some words on a certain subject," answered Airlie, soberly.

"Won't you tell me about it, Airlie?"

"Yes, it was about mission work—the need for medical nurses for the zenanas: that was all. I think Janet is coming round, Errol."

"We're all coming round, Airlie," answered Errol, abruptly. "You have opened our eyes to a good many things since you came." Airlie was silent, and her face wore a very curious expression.

"How are the studies getting on, Errol?" was all she asked.

"Very well; I think I should get through in July."

"And then?"

"Oh, then to work, I suppose. In what way I have not yet decided on. I believe I could get the best part of my father's practice yet, if I were so minded."

"That would be a good thing," said Airlie. "And what about Jack?"

"That's what bothers, Airlie. If I step into father's shoes Jack will need to 'find for himself,' as Susan would say. As I am the elder, I should turn my face to the weather and leave the Edinburgh opening for Jack. Don't you think so?"

"Yes."

Airlie spoke quite quietly, and without the slightest hesitation, as if there could

be no doubt about the course to be pursued.

Errol Keith bit his lips. It had cost him something to bring himself to say such a thing, and the calm matter-of-fact way in which his cousin received it was rather provoking. Sometimes Airlie was intensely aggravating, and yet it was impossible to be vexed with her longer than a moment.

"You seem to think it a very small matter, Airlie," he said quickly. "I assure you I do not think it so unimportant."

"I did not say I thought it small, Errol. I think you misunderstand me often."

"What do you mean by that brief, curt monosyllable, then, and the indifferent look which accompanied it?"

"Do you know what I was thinking, Errol?"

"No."

"What a blessed thing it must be to know one's duty, and to be willing to do it," said Airlie, almost passionately. "Oh, Errol, if you only knew what it is to me to lie here doing nothing, when all my

being cries out for action. If I am never to be strong again, I could almost pray that I might not be spared very long."

"Airlie, though you may not have been very active, you have done a great, good work in this house," said Errol, quickly, and his strong hand touched for a moment his cousin's dark curls. "Why, what meaning had duty for me before you came? I had neither aim nor object in life except to make the time pass pleasantly."

"How can I have done so much, Errol? I have not preached, have I? Don't you remember Jack warning me of the consequences if I attempted such a thing?"

"You haven't preached in words, perhaps, but then you are a living sermon," said Errol, with flushed cheek and kindling eye.

Airlie's head bent lower on her breast till her face was hidden, perhaps to hide the glad light in her eyes, or the motion of her lips in silent thanksgiving.

"I think I am stronger than I was, Errol," she said after a little. "I can come upstairs alone now, and that is a great

thing. Do you think I shall ever be well?"

She looked up wistfully into the kind dark face; that look went straight to Errol's heart.

"I don't know, Airlie; I hope so. If you would let me bring Laurence, or some of them to see you, perhaps there might be something done. I have feared to speak of it, Airlie, but I am afraid sometimes of your back when I see you walking. Won't you let me get some advice other than old Christmas's? It is of great moment to me, Airlie."

"If you care so much, Errol, do whatever seems best to you. Perhaps you are right. I ought not to have been so obstinate before."

"It is only where yourself is concerned you are careless, Airlie. You have such constant thought for others, you forget yourself; that is the explanation of what you are pleased to call your obstinacy. Supposing you were to grow strong, Airlie, what would you do?"

Airlie lifted her head, and fixed her eyes full on his face.

"Can you ask, Errol? All I love is bordered by the green hills of Tahai. I would ask no greater joy than to be permitted to live and die among those who loved and tended me from my birth."

"All you love, Airlie? Then *we* are only strangers to you still?"

"Oh, no; I spoke without thinking. Strangers! after all your love and care. Oh, Errol Keith! you know I did not mean that. Here comes Jack in his usual hurricane fashion."

"Hulloa, Airlie, old girl!" called out the irrepressible in his usual boisterous way. "Not up yet, eh. I'm afraid it's a poor lookout for that waltz you promised me on Christmas Eve. I'll have something under the mistletoe instead!"

"All right, Jack; anything to please you," laughed Airlie, looking with real pleasure on Jack's ruddy, smiling face. "Any prospect of skating yet?"

"Isn't there just? Why, it's perfectly freezing outside. But it's a jolly waste of time, I tell you; and I honestly mean to grind hard

till Christmas, but when there's good ice, and all the jolliest people you know on it, I tell you, Airlie, it's hard enough lines to stick in the house. Needs courage, you bet ; as much as to march up to the cannon's mouth. Oh, Airlie Keith, if you'd only rise for one little hour, and let me take you to Duddingston when the ice is good, I'd die happy. It beats these Tahai lakes, I tell you, all to sticks, in spite of the alligators and other interesting reptiles to be studied there."

" I only wish I could, Jack. I'm as willing to go as you are to take me, I assure you."

" But you are getting well, aren't you, Airlie ? "

" I'm not very sure. I hope so, Jack," said Airlie, quietly, and Errol suddenly walked away out of the room.

" Because if you aren't, you know, it's a shame. You're such a jolly little girl."

" Not too religious," laughed Airlie.

" Oh, well, sometimes ; only you don't push it down a fellow's throat, if you'll excuse my plain speech," said Jack, bluntly. " And you're always here when I want you, and you

know everything, which few girls do. And so, you know, we can't do without you, Airlie."

"I am very glad I am so much to you, Jack. It almost reconciles me to lying still."

"And you've made me turn over a new leaf, I can tell you, though perhaps you don't think it. I never drink now, Airlie, and I used to often, you know, for company's sake, more than was good for me; and I'm honestly trying to stick in and get through soon. It's a shame the way we've idled our time and lived off our good-natured mother. But we're going to be better boys now. Errol's grinding no end. So that's what you've done, old girl. Don't call it nothing. There's the bell, and I'm off, for I tell you I'm as hungry as a hawk."

So saying, with a nod and a smile, Jack waltzed out of the room.

Left alone, Airlie lay still for a long time with her eyes closed, her face wearing a look of exquisite peace. She had had her reward for her year's patient bearing of her cross of pain, and she found it passing sweet.

CHAPTER IV.

"IF she were your own daughter, Professor Laurence, would you risk the operation?"

"Most assuredly I should," returned the professor, without a moment's hesitation.

It was Errol Keith who asked the question in the library at Errol Lodge one sunny May morning, when all the world seemed waking to the beauty and fulness of the early summer. His fine face wore a grave, concerned look, as if he felt the subject under discussion to be of the utmost moment to him.

"I will explain it to you, Mr Keith," said the professor in his gravely kind manner. "Unless the operation be risked, your cousin must resign herself to the certainty of becoming a confirmed invalid, and her life, however long or short, will be full of suffering. On the other hand, if she consents to undergo this

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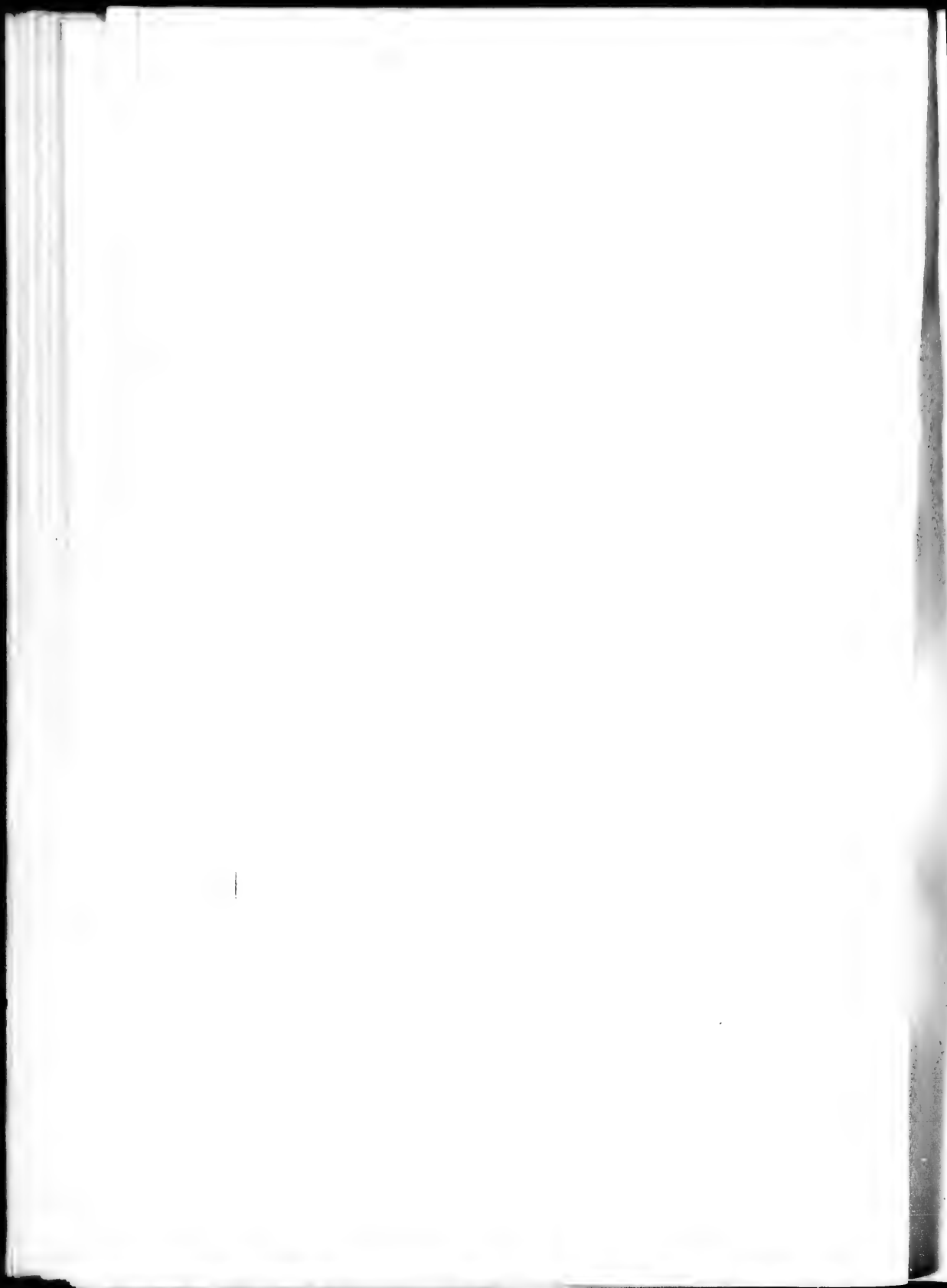
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Errol and Professor Laurence.



operation, there are nine chances out of ten that she will be restored to perfect health. Do you think it would be wise to hesitate on account of the one slender chance of failure?"

"Certainly not, Professor Laurence. If my cousin consents, will you undertake the operation?"

"Willingly, in conjunction with your own physician," returned the professor. "I presume Mrs Keith will inform the young lady of our decision, and let us know her opinion."

"Some one will tell Airlie," Errol answered. "It will not be difficult, Professor Laurence; her brave bright patience has often astonished me."

"She seems of a remarkably sweet, cheerful disposition, which doubly ensures our success. When you come into practice, Mr Keith, you will speedily learn how much depends on the patients themselves. These desponding folks are the most troublesome to deal with."

"I believe you. Well, we will discuss this matter, and let you know the result."

When are you to be ready to fill your

father's shoes, Mr Keith?" asked the professor, with one of his kindly searching glances. "It seems to me that you ought to have been in practice long ago. Forgive my candour."

"So I ought, Professor Laurence, so I ought!" returned Errol, quickly. "I dare say you can guess pretty correctly at the true state of the case. It is six years since I entered the University first, and there was not the shadow of a reason why I should not have graduated at least eighteen months ago. I have shamefully idled my time and wasted my opportunities."

"Ah, well, if you are awaking to the seriousness of life, there may be no great harm done," said the professor, kindly. "Has this little girl from the wilds of Africa taught her tall cousins a lesson in life, I wonder?"

Errol smiled, but did not deny it. It was impossible to resent what his professor said. He was an old man who had known and loved his father, with whom he had sat on the same bench at school and college, and who yet retained a kindly interest in the children of his old friend. After the professor took his leave,

Errol returned to the drawing-room to his mother.

"Dear me, you have had quite a consultation, surely?" she said, rather querulously. "What has it been all about? What does the professor say about Airlie? I ought to have come down, I suppose, but really my nerves are hardly equal to the trial."

"Airlie is seriously ill, mother," answered Errol. "Professor Laurence urges the advisability of an immediate operation; it is her only chance of restoration to health."

"An operation, here in this house!" exclaimed Mrs Keith. "Why, the anxiety and the worry of it would kill me."

"And what about Airlie, then?" asked Errol, with a slight bitterness, impatient of his mother's selfish fears.

"Really, Errol, you put her before us all," said Mrs Keith, sharply. "Of course I am very sorry for her, and if Laurence advises the operation, I suppose it must take place. But there must be a nurse got, for I am not fit to wait upon her."

"Of course there will be a nurse got.

Everything will be done to save you anxiety or trouble, mother," answered Errol. "But Airlie must be attended to. She has no one but us to look to. You would not think of sending her to the infirmary, surely?"

"No, no, that would never do. It would look so wretchedly bad. How can you suggest such a thing? Isn't it only poor, low kind of people who go there? Really, Errol, you are very aggravating."

Errol was silent a moment. He knew his mother must be feeling weaker than usual, and he was glad to attribute her heartlessness to the state of her health. Time was when he would not have put such a strong curb on his impatience. Errol Keith had not always been mindful of his filial duty to his widowed mother; and she had borne a great deal, with a patience surprising in a woman of her character. But she had always made idols of her boys.

"Will you tell Airlie this, then, mother?" he asked presently.

"Dear me, no. How could I? It would make me quite ill for ever so long. You or

Janet must tell her. Tell her I'm very, very sorry for her, and I'll come and see her when I am able."

"Where is Janet, mother?"

"With Airlie, probably. Everybody waits hand and foot on Airlie. I don't complain, only it shows the difference between an old woman's suffering and that of a young girl. We know who gets the sympathy."

"Dear mother, don't speak like that!" said Errol in distress, for his mother had begun to cry, and he could not bear the sight of a woman's tears.

"Aren't you going to your classes to-day? Jack is away long ago."

"No, mother, I'm not going out to-day," answered Errol, and leaving the room he went upstairs, and knocked lightly at the door of the little sitting-room where Airlie now spent the most of her time. She had not been downstairs since the beginning of spring.

"Come in," said Janet's voice, and he entered she was sitting by Airlie's sofa, bathing the poor, hot head with eau de

cologne. She looked round quickly, as if seeking to gather from her brother's face the verdict of the professor.

Airlie opened her eyes and smiled in her peaceful, happy way; and there was nothing to indicate that she had been excited or troubled at all by the ordeal she had just undergone.

"Well, Errol, what does he say?" she asked, cheerfully; "you look so sober, I am afraid he thinks me as useless as I do myself. Don't be afraid to tell me. It matters little to me either way."

"He is not hopeless, Airlie," said Errol, quickly; for, not of his seeking, the task of telling her the verdict had fallen upon him. "There is one chance. He is very anxious that you should take advantage of it. Are you strong enough to bear it?"

"I am quite calm, Errol. What is it?"

"An operation, Airlie," said Errol, in a choking voice. "He says, if you were his own daughter he would go on with it," he continued, eagerly, now that the worst was over. "Think, Airlie. He says it is sure

to be successful, and that you will be completely restored to health."

Airlie had winced a little at his first words, but she grew calm and bright again, and only answered quietly,

"Whatever you all think for the best, Errol, I am willing to do," she said, simply; "I could trust myself implicitly in the hands of Professor Laurence, though I never saw him till to-day."

Errol Keith, almost overcome, walked away out of the room. Then Janet saw her cousin's thin face grow very white, and her lips quiver, and she laid her cool kind hand once more on the broad sweet brow.

"I am such a coward, Janet," said Airlie, opening her eyes, with a little fluttering smile. "It is rather a trying thought the surgeon's knife, isn't it? It is good of you all to take so much trouble and interest in me."

"Hush, Airlie dear; how can it be a trouble when you are so dear and good?" said Janet, quickly.

"I hope it will be very soon, for I should not like to have many days to think of it.

But, after all, Janet, what can it matter? Living or dying, I am the Lord's, and He will not hurt His own."

As Janet Keith listened to these words, uttered in a sweet, quiet voice, and saw the look of peace which accompanied them, a sharp pang of envy shot through her heart. Airlie Keith had few indeed of what the world terms precious things, but she possessed a happy secret altogether unknown to her. She pictured herself in Airlie's place,—could she face such an ordeal with that brave unflinching spirit? Could she thus let herself lie, as it were, in God's hand, knowing He would do all things well? Ah, no! Of late, many vague indescribable yearnings had rent the proud reticent soul of Janet Keith. She had begun to feel how paltry and unworthy were her aims in comparison with the sweet, holy, unselfish aspirings which were the main-spring of her cousin's life.

"What are you thinking of, Janet? Tell me, dear. Don't vex yourself about me. Don't you see the first natural pang is over, and I am quite at rest. As Errol says, would

it not be a glorious thing to be perfectly well? Do you know, I cannot recall a single day when I was entirely free from pain."

"Since you came to us, Airlie?"

"Yes, and for very long before that, Janet. But you have not told me your sober thoughts."

"I was thinking, Airlie, that if I had to change places with you now, what an awful thing it would be for me."

"How awful? I think you would bear trouble nobly, Janet. You have such a fine spirit, you would never give up."

Janet Keith shook her head, and her beautiful face deepened in the shadow.

"I have not your secret, Airlie. If I had to give up the world, I have nothing to cling to," was all she said.

Airlie turned round, with a quick, glad light in her solemn dark eyes. "But, Janet, you may lay hold of the Rock. Trust yourself with Him, He will lead you on. He will give you a joy of which you can have no idea. But for that joy, Janet, how could I have been sustained through the trial and

desolation I have endured? How could I have given up papa and mamma if I had not known who had need of them, and who would comfort me?"

"Teach me, Airlie! show me the way," fell from Janet's lips, and she bowed her golden head upon her hands; "my life is empty and purposeless, show me how and where it can be filled."

So Airlie began to speak, in great gladness of heart, upon the golden theme she loved. Even in her hour of direst weakness and need the Master had work for her to do. She had bemoaned herself as an empty vessel, and, lo, she was to be filled with His love in order to supply the chalice of another's need.

CHAPTER V.

"ISN'T it lovely here, Airlie?"

"Oh, it is! that sea breeze, Janet, is the very elixir of life!"

So saying, Airlie Keith folded her arms behind her head, and drew in a long breath of the salt air coming up from the sea. They were sitting together in the fragrant old-fashioned garden of a remote farm-house on the western coast; the day was one of July's sunniest mood. Books and work lay on the rustic bench beside them, but both were too much occupied with the beauty of their surroundings to be inclined to work or read. And yet the place was not quite new to them, for it was six weeks now since they had sought it as a summer retreat. Could that bright-looking maiden with the clear sparkling eyes, and the tinge of delicate colour in her rounding cheek, be the trail

invalid for whose life there had been such fear two months ago at Errol Lodge? Ay, verily it was Airlie Keith. The operation had proved eminently successful, and now Airlie Keith was almost restored to perfect health. She had come to Kilcraigie convalescent, to grow strong and vigorous under the influences of air and earth and sea. They had done their work well.

"What are you watching for, Airlie?" asked Janet, with a smile, following her cousin's look down the white road which led to the little hamlet on the shore.

"I am wondering about the post, Janet. Isn't it time we heard something of Errol now?"

"Yes, I believe it is. Poor boy, he has not had much of a holiday. We must make a great deal of him in the few days he will be with us here."

"Isn't that Jack and Marion coming up the slope, Janet?"

"Yes, and I see letters in Jack's hand. Don't you see him waving frantically to us? I believe he has good news."

"Let us go and see," exclaimed Airlie, and jumping up, she ran off down the garden, leaving Janet to follow more leisurely.

"Hurrah! three cheers for Doctor Errol!" exclaimed Jack, directly the slim white-robed figure was within hearing. "He has passed with first-class honours. Hurrah! good for the old boy, isn't it? He'll be down to-night - won't we give him a jolly reception."

"Oh! I am so glad!" exclaimed Airlie, breathlessly. "How proud and glad Aunt Marion will be. And he will be here to-night?"

"Yes; isn't it all splendid, Airlie?" said Marion, in her gentle way. "Errol was so anxious. If he had not done well, I would have been afraid to meet him. And now we can have a real jolly fortnight here. Won't he be astonished to see you, Airlie?"

"Why, pussy?"

"Because you look quite different. Doesn't she, Jack?"

"Don't you just. Why, you look just stunning!" said Jack, looking with genuine admiration at his cousin's bright, sweet face.

"I bet he'd hardly recognise you. But I tell you I'm jolly glad the exam's passed off so well. I only wish such luck will fall to me next year."

"Deserve it, Jack, and it will," said Airlie, in that earnest way of hers. Jack nodded, and his eye shone with his high resolve. Truly there was a change. Airlie Keith had awakened in these two young men a perception of life's more earnest meanings, and her quiet, sweet influence was already reaping its precious harvest. Errol arrived by the steamer at sunset, and was met by his brother and sisters, Airlie remaining in the house beside her aunt; for she had to be careful yet of the chill night airs, and never exposed herself to needless risks. No physician had ever a more obedient and willing patient than Airlie Keith.

"Errol will just step into his father's practice by and by, and it will be very pleasant," said Mrs Keith, in a self-satisfied sort of way, as Airlie and she sat in the wide, low window of the sitting-room, waiting for the party from the pier. "It is a very good practice, you

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know; among quite the best people. I have no doubt Errol will make a very fine position for himself in Edinburgh."

"Errol would win a position for himself anywhere, Aunt Marion," said Airlie, quietly.

"Oh, of course. But I hope he will be sensible, and not disappoint me. I have set my heart on seeing him follow in his father's footsteps."

"But, Aunt Marion, suppose duty called him elsewhere," Airlie ventured to say.

"My dear, a son's duty is to obey and consider his mother," said Mrs Keith, severely. "You have great influence with your cousins, Airlie. If you see Errol inclined to wander, I hope you will use it for good, and urge his duty upon him."

"I hope I shall always use what little influence I possess for good, Aunt Marion," said Airlie, meekly.

"I don't doubt it in the least, Airlie. You have really been quite an acquisition to us. I don't know how it is, but the house seems a pleasanter place since you came. There is very little of that jarring and nagging among

the children which used to be such a trial to my nerves. But I daresay, as they get older they are gathering sense. I hear voices ; do you see them coming, Airlie?"

"Yes, Aunt Marion, they are just at the garden gate."

"And how does that poor boy look, worn out after his ordeal?"

"I can't see, Aunt Marion, it is so dark in the shadow of the trees," said Airlie, a trifle nervously ; for her heart was fluttering at the thought of seeing Errol again. Ah, surely it required something more than cousinly regard to account for that strange, sweet thrill of joy with which she heard his deep pleasant voice ringing through the sweet July dusk.

Presently the happy party entered the house, and then there was such a babel of greeting, and congratulations, and joyous talk. Airlie did not say much, but the fervour with which she returned Errol's close hand-clasp told him something of what was in her heart. When the lamp was brought in and he saw the great and happy change in his cousin's appearance, his cup of joy was full.

"Airlie, I cannot tell what it is to me to see you like this," he said in a low voice. "It is the crowning touch to this happy day."

She smiled and nodded, and there was no time to say more, for tea was in, and Jack clamouring for them to begin.

He had a dozen questions to ask about the different students who had gone up for examination along with Errol. And his face grew rather sober when he heard some of the questions; and he shook his head dolefully and said it would be a poor lookout for him next year if the papers were as difficult. Errol did not appear to be outwardly elated with his success, but none knew better than Airlie how significant was the deep quiet light of satisfaction in his fine eye. Mrs Keith seemed much inclined to discuss the future, but Errol skilfully changed the subject every time she broached it. It was evident, both to Airlie and Janet, that he did not wish it to be settled in any way yet.

"Do you know anything of Errol's plans, Airlie?" Janet asked that night. When they were alone in the room they shared together

"No, Janet ; he has not confided them to me except in a vague fashion. But I know that he will make an earnest good use of whatever sphere and opportunities are given him," Airlie answered.

"Oh, I am sure of that, Airlie. When mamma was speaking so much about him beginning practice beside us, I fancied he looked troubled. Do you know, I should not be at all surprised though Errol were to do something we don't expect."

"What kind of thing, Janet?"

Janet brushed out her long fair hair, and did not at once reply.

"Don't you know where his chief interests, apart from his studies, have been centring of late, Airlie?" she asked. "I would not grudge one of my brothers to the mission-field." Her voice in the last sentence was rather unsteady, and when she brushed aside the golden waves of hair, Airlie saw her eyes wet with tears.

"That is a great deal for you to say, Janet."

"*You* have made it easy for me to say it. Errol will do a great good work anywhere, but

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Janet brushed out her long fair hair.

I do think he has all the attributes of a successful missionary."

"Would you really not think it a pity that his splendid talents should be devoted to such a cause?"

"Airlie! Show me a better! Are you growing lukewarm?"

"Oh no, Janet. Forgive me, I only wanted to hear you say more. It is so sweet to me to listen," said Airlie, through her happy tears.

Janet smiled,—a tender and exquisite smile,—which softened her face into a rarer and more spiritual beauty.

"The trouble will be with mamma. She does not like the little home-mission work I have been planning to begin after we return. She seems to think it *infra dig.* for me to go among the poor. What she will say should Errol propose to go abroad, I am afraid to think."

"If Errol's life-work is to be abroad, the way will be opened up, and all Aunt Marion's scruples removed," said Airlie, softly, and dropping her face on her hands, she gave herself up for a moment to the sweet and

blessed thoughts which surged upon her like the sunlit waves of a summer sea. She had come to Scotland an exile, leaving heart and love behind under tropical skies, and lo ! had not the desert blossomed like the rose ? Had God not done great things for her, and given her a glorious antidote for her pain ? Many things were made plain to her in that quiet moment. She saw the significance of the cross which had been laid upon her ; she knew now the inner and hidden mystery of the ministry of pain. By simply lying still, bearing patiently what was ordered, speaking a gentle word as opportunity was given, she had served the Lord in a way she knew not of. In the early sunshine next morning, Errol and Airlie went away for a little stroll together along the green lanes which skirted the shore. Nobody wondered to see them go, for they had always been such "chums," as Jack had it ; only Janet, watching from the drawing room windows, smiled a little tremulously, and turned away, for her eyes grew dim. Was it a premonition of a double parting which might come sooner than she or any of them anticipated ?

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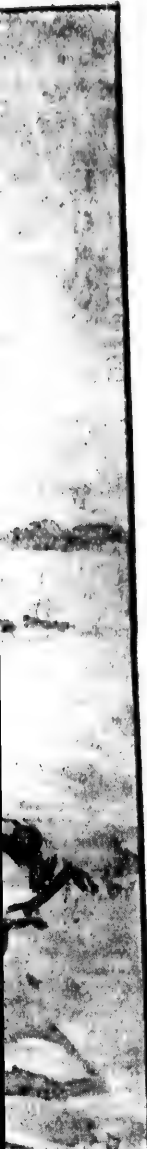
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They came at length to a little sheltered nook.



Errol and Airlie talked a great deal as they went, chiefly, however, of the beautiful coast retreat in which Airlie had found the elixir of health; the subject nearest their hearts was furthest from their lips. They came at length to a little sheltered nook among the rocks, close on the beach, and as the air was mild and soft, Errol suggested that they might take a little rest before returning home.

"How well you look, Airlie! It is quite true what Jack said, that I should hardly have known you," said Errol, looking down from his tall height to the low rock where his cousin sat. "Do you feel quite strong?"

"Quite. Oh, Errol, the joy of being free from pain! of feeling really well. I shall never be able to thank you for placing me under Professor Laurence's care."

"Hush, Airlie, no more of that. I saw Laurence asking for you yesterday. Well, what do you think of what my mother was saying last night? It seems to be a settled question in the family that I am to begin practice in Edinburgh."

"Your mother hopes for and expects it."

"It goes against the grain, Airlie."

"Duty often does, until we accept it as God-given," said Airlie, quietly.

"Then there's Jack ; mamma forgets him, I think. What will he do next year? He is not so well fitted to push his way as I am, and——"

"And what?"

"I will tell you by and by. How long is it since you came to us? eighteen months, isn't it?"

"Yes, fully."

"You are one of us now, Airlie ; we will never spare you from Errol Lodge any more."

Airlie winced a little, and for a time there was nothing said.

"If I stand the winter well, Errol, and feel strong in spring, I must go."

"Where?"

"Back to Tahai."

"Oh, nonsense! What would be the use of going back there, probably to fall into bad health again. We will never allow it."

Airlie looked up into his face, her earnest eyes full of meaning.

"You will be the first to bid me go, Errol, if I feel that I should, I know."

"I am not so sure of that. Would a medical missionary be of any use in Tahai?"

"Use! Errol Keith! There is hardly a limit to the influence such an one would have there. Papa often regretted his lack of medical skill. Ministering to the body so often opens up the way for ministering to the soul. I wish the day would dawn when there would be a medical missionary in Tahai."

"Then you will leave us in spring without a regret, Airlie Keith? We are nothing to you after two years," said Errol, with a strange impatience.

Airlie rose, and turned her head away from him. She was deeply hurt, but she would not let him see it.

"We are not agreeing very well to-day, Errol," she said, cheerfully, at last. "Come, let us go home, and see if we can get up a picnic in the boat to the island."

Errol Keith laid his firm, strong hand on her arm, and bent his eyes full on her face. Her colour rose under that look,

"You will leave us in spring on one condition, Airlie."

"Well, Errol?"

"That you take me with you."

"In what capacity?" asked Airlie, trying to smile, but tears came instead. "It's a long time till spring, Errol. Don't let us say any more about it to-day."

But Errol bent from his tall height and kissed her for the first time since he had given her that cousinly kiss on the platform at the Waverley Station. And I think it was all understood then. And Errol knew that Airlie loved him, and would be his wife some day, if God willed that they should spend any part of their earthly life together.

CHAPTER VI.

“**N**EVER was woman tried as I have been with my children. If my husband had lived there would have been none of this! Janet, I wish we had never looked on the face of Airlie Keith.”

“Hush, mamma! That is a very hard thing to say,” said Janet, quickly. “Whatever you may think of this step Errol wishes to take, none of us can deny that Airlie is worthy of him. And after all, mother, I am sure papa would not have grudged him to the work.”

“How do you know what your father would have done?” was Mrs Keith’s sharp retort. “Talk of heathen; there are plenty here in Edinburgh, I am sure, if Errol must act a missionary part. But to let him go away to that terrible place, to give him up for ever, my noble boy! Oh, Janet! Janet! you know nothing of a mother’s feelings.”

Janet Keith looked on in sad perplexity at her mother's keen distress. She could not but feel deeply for her, she looked so frail and worn, and the thought flashed upon her that there might be a duty for Errol lying nearer home. And yet, as she recalled his kindly eye and enthusiastic look when he had spoken to her of devoting himself to the work of the medical mission, a slight sigh escaped her lips. It would be a trial of no ordinary kind for him to give up his ardent hopes; and then there was Airlie. Nothing, Janet knew, would keep her back now from the mission field; must they then let her go forth, a frail, solitary girl, to that great lone land, where only love and prayers could bind their sundered hearts. It was the month of November now, and after some hesitation, for he greatly feared his mother's verdict, Errol had laid before her all his hopes and plans. And she had listened with a storm of tears and reproaches, and had shut herself in her own room for two days, and resolutely refused to see anyone but Janet. So, as may be imagined, the domestic atmosphere at Errol

Lodge that bleak winter's day was about as dreary as that out of doors. The silence which had briefly fallen on the two, while Mrs Keith languidly played with the breakfast Janet had brought, was broken presently by a low tap at the door, followed by the unexpected entrance of Airlie herself. She was very pale, and there were dark rims round the big pathetic eyes, which told of a heavy heart. But there was no hesitation or faltering in her look, but rather a dignity and resolve which caused Janet to look at her in amaze.

Mrs Keith, after the first glance, continued her breakfast, calmly ignoring the presence of her niece. Janet rose with flushing face, for she saw Airlie wince, just as she had done that summer day when Errol had broken to her the verdict of Professor Laurence.

"Would you leave us for a little, Janet?" she said very, very quietly; "I should like to speak with Aunt Marion."

Janet nodded, but first put her gentle arm round Airlie's slim shoulders, and kissed her on the brow.

"Well, Airlie Keith, what have you to say to me?" asked Mrs Keith, the moment the door closed upon Janet.

"May I put your tray on the table first, Aunt Marion?"

"No, I am not finished," answered Mrs Keith as coldly as before. "Pray go on."

Again that strange pathetic wincing look crossed Airlie's face, and she pressed her lips to still their quivering. She was sensitive to a degree, and her aunt's manner cut her to the heart.

"Are you so angry with me that you will not even look at me, Aunt Marion? If I have hurt or wronged you, it has been unintentional, I assure you."

"You cannot expect me to say what I cannot think, that you have made a good return for my kindness," said Mrs Keith, calmly, for with the persistence of a selfish nature, she hugged her imagined wrong to her heart. "You know well enough that my eldest son was my chief stay and support. Was it kind, or right, or Christian, to tempt him to leave me?"

"Aunt Marion, you have no right to say such things to me," said Airlie, quietly, yet with a certain proud dignity which became her well. "How can you attribute such a thing to me? I have never sought to influence Errol, and no one dare say I sought to win his love. I could almost wish I had died before I left Tahai."

"It is all very well to say that, when the mischief is done," said Mrs Keith, quietly. "Although it might be a very good and suitable thing for you and others to take mission work on their shoulders, it was a different case with my sons. Your religion were as real as it is zealous, Airlie, you would have urged them to fulfil their nearest duty, rather than turn their backs on their widowed mother in her hour of need."

Airlie bit her lips. Oh! this was harder than all! What a stern control it needed to bear this with meekness and patience. She trembled under the ordeal in every limb.

"What I came particularly to say, is this, Aunt Marion," she said, even more gently than before, "I will make immediate pre-

parations to leave Scotland. They will be glad of my services in Tahai, and I am perfectly able now to undertake the journey."

"People will say I am heartless if you do that. I would rather provide the money for you to spend a few months in the south of England or France, and you could go out in spring," said Mrs Keith, with selfish eagerness. "Really you are quite sensible, Airlie, and I am sorry if I seemed to judge you hardly. You must allow a margin for a mother's feelings. I believe that if the temptation were removed, Errol would soon come to his senses. We will try and be as gay as possible this winter, and try and show him all the advantages of life in Edinburgh. Well, Airlie, what do you say? I could let Janet and Marion alternately spend a time with you, if you consent to go to some of the health resorts. It would do you good too."

Up rose the warm red flush to Airlie's neck and cheek and brow. What it cost her to keep a firm hold of that meek and quiet spirit the Master will give to all who

prayerfully seek it, was known only to herself and to Him.

"I don't think you quite understand me, Aunt Marion. I could not do that. But I will go away just as soon as I can make my preparations. I love Errol so well," she added with a simple grandeur and pathos, "that I would die rather than give him a moment's pain, or do him the slightest harm. I cannot help it that he has learned to care a little for me; I never sought it or encouraged it, Aunt Marion. Nothing could have been further from my thoughts. But you need not fear, I will never be his wife. But the other matter he must settle with himself and God."

So saying, Airlie turned about and walked with steady enough steps out of the room. But when she reached her own, and had locked herself in, she stood in the middle of the floor, and pressing her hands to her temples, uttered a long, low moan of intense pain.

She had been sorely tried, wounded in the tenderest, most womanly part; she could have

cried out, "Lord, if Thou wilt, let this cup pass from me!" it was so bitter to the taste. But He willed that she should drink it to the very dregs. Airlie went downstairs no more that day. Errol, who since the beginning of the session had been assisting his professor in the anatomy class-room, came home to dinner as usual at four o'clock.

"Where is Airlie?" was his first question, as Janet and the others took their places at the table.

"Airlie is in her own room, Errol. She will not come down. I have sent Ellen up with a tray. I knocked at the door myself, but she asked me to wait a little, she would see me by-and-bye," said Janet, with troubled eyes.

"What's up? That isn't like Airlie," said Jack, his eyes round with wonder; but Janet made no reply. Errol, though evidently disturbed, exerted himself to be as agreeable as usual, but they were all glad when dinner was over and they could rise from the table.

"Airlie saw mamma this morning, Errol," said Janet in a low voice, detaining him in the dining-room a moment behind the others.

"Did she? What occurred?"

"I don't know. Oh, Errol, I am afraid this is going to be a great trouble to us all," said Janet, bursting into tears. "I am very sorry for you, and most of all for Airlie; mamma will never consent."

Errol made no reply, but stalked out of the room, and upstairs to his mother's dressing-room door.

Mrs Keith had now risen, and was resting on a low lounge near the fire. She sat up when Errol entered, for she saw that he had come to say something on the vexed subject.

"You saw Airlie to-day, mother, Janet tells me," he began without preamble. "What did you say to *her*?"

"Much the same as I said to you. She understands that I will never consent, so there is no more to be said."

Mrs Keith spoke with that unmistakable decision which is sometimes exhibited very strongly by those who are weak in many respects.

Errol leaned up against the mantel-shelf, and bent his gravely troubled eyes on the

fire. There was a sore, sore struggle going on in his mind at that moment. Whether was love or duty to win the day?

"Airlie is not quite so unreasonable as you were, Errol. She is determined to leave us; and really you must admit that it would be advisable. I offered to send her to the south of England or France, and even to let one of the girls go with her, but she resented that pretty sharply, so I suppose she must just go back to Africa. I am sure I have done my duty by her, and have watched and cared for her as if she had been my own child. No one can attach any blame to me; and it was quite understood that it was only for a time she was to be with us."

"Did Airlie say she would return to Africa?"

"Yes, immediately."

"And you will allow her to go out there alone, mother?"

"Really, Errol Keith, I wish you would be reasonable. What am I to do? How can I keep the girl, if she is bent on going?"

"Then I am to have no say in this matter,

mother? I am just to give up all my hopes because you wish it?"

"It is surely not too much for a widowed mother to ask of her eldest son. I lay no commands upon you, Errol. I have simply expressed my opinions. You may do as you please. Only if you marry Airlie Keith, and bury yourself in the wilds of Africa for her sake, you will do so without my approval or consent."

"It is not altogether for her sake, dear though she is to me," said Errol, with deep earnestness. "I feel as if God were calling me to the work; my whole heart is in it, mother."

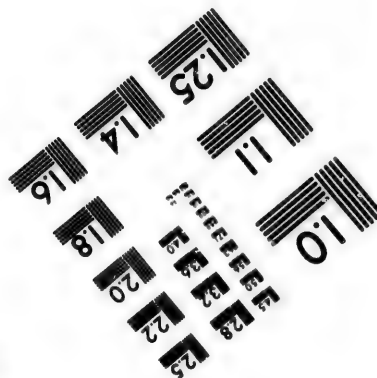
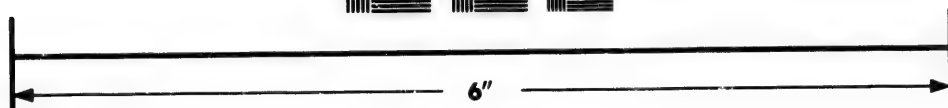
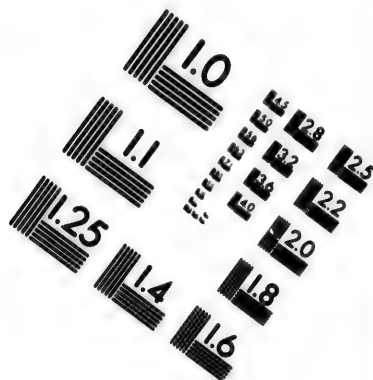
Mrs Keith slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"It is not easy to believe in religion so quickly put on. The probability is that it will be as quickly and thoughtlessly laid aside. I like Christianity which quietly and unostentatiously does its duty, without saying so much about it."

Words of pleading rose to the lips of Errol Keith, but the sight of his mother's calm, proud, determined face kept them back.

"You have given me a difficult task, mother," was all he said, and walked slowly out of the room.





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He met Janet on the stairs ; she had been lingering about, not knowing what to do. She loved them all, and she was sorely vexed that anything should have happened to disturb the happy harmony which seemed to have been inaugurated in the household with the coming of Airlie.

"Mother is inexorable, Janet," Errol said, in response to his sister's mute questioning. "I must see Airlie. Will you come up with me?"

Janet nodded, and they ascended the stair together. This time the door was opened to Janet's knock, and Airlie's face, sweet, placid, and unruffled, smiled upon them, and bade them enter. It was the same little sitting-room she had first entered when she came to Errol Lodge, and she had gathered her own books and things about her, and made it a little home for herself. Everybody in the house, save, perhaps, Mrs Keith, loved to spend an hour in Airlie's room. Janet merely crossed the threshold, then swiftly turned round and fled with a bursting sob. Under her cousin's influence Janet Keith had learned

to feel keenly for the sorrows of others; all that was sweetest and best in her nature had of late come to the surface, and the change in the proud Miss Keith was observed by all who knew her. When Janet left them, Errol shut the door, and then these two, who loved each other so dearly that it would be almost like death to part, looked steadfastly into each other's faces, without a word.

"Airlie, Airlie!" fell at last hoarsely from Errol's lips, "tell me what to do."

"There is only one course in the meantime, Errol," said Airlie, in her quiet, peaceful voice. "I will go; and though we are apart we need not forget. We can think of and care for each other apart as well as together, and we shall both have our work to comfort us."

"I cannot, Airlie! If you go, I must," said Errol, passionately. Then Airlie folded her quiet hands on his arm, and looked up at him with shining, earnest eyes. Her battle had been fought and was won, and now she must needs help him.

"Errol, we would not be happy, dear, we would not prosper, if we acted in disobedience

to your mother. I think your first duty is to her. So I will go, and perhaps in God's good time, Aunt Marion may see things differently, and if not——"

"What then?" asked Errol, almost harshly, his new-born faith sorely tried.

"Then we will labour on, you in Scotland, and I in Africa, and—and, we will meet some day."

Her voice broke, and in a moment Errol's arms were round her, and for a long time there was no more said.

And it happened all just as Airlie said; a fortnight more and Errol Lodge knew her sweet, bright presence no more.

She went forth alone, yet not alone, for the Master whom she so faithfully served went with her, shielding her with His everlasting love. She had her recompense in the welcome accorded her in that far land in the certainty that she was needed, and that her work would be blessed. It was harder for Errol Keith than for her to sacrifice love to duty, for he was but faltering yet on the pilgrim way, and his faith, perhaps, had a

slacker hold. Nevertheless, he manfully did his part, and for his mother's sake buried out of sight the sweet hopes with which he had looked forward to crown his manhood. His self-abnegation was blessed to himself and all with whom he came in contact; and while faithfully fulfilling the laborious duties of his profession, he did not allow any opportunity for doing good slip past him. And there are so many at our very doors lying to our hand, if only our eyes be not holden so that we cannot see.

Mrs Keith is still a fretful, selfish invalid, unhappy herself, and the source of some unhappiness to others. If there has ever been any touch of relenting in her soul she has not yet shown it, for Errol and Airlie are still apart. But they are not unhappy. Each knows the other true, each knows that though there may be no meeting on earth, there *will* be reunion beyond.

So Airlie's Mission, though mayhaps fraught with some pain to herself, has borne its fruit, not in Errol's life alone, but in Janet's, now the sweet, noble mistress of a happy home;

in careless Jack's, who has graduated successfully, and is doing a good work in his own sphere; in Marion's, who is the light and sunshine of Errol Lodge. And Airlie's recompense is sure. Knowing that, she labours on; and if at times her woman's heart fails her a little, she has but to carry her cross to the Master's feet, and leaving it there, go on again in faith and hope. For the day WILL come, when all earth's mysteries will be made plain, and when we will know, beyond a doubt, that all things work together for good to those that love Him.

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